DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 947 EA 025 424

AUTHOR Milstein, Mike M.
TITLE An Exploration of the Relationship of School District Restructuring to Educator Plateauing and Resiliency.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Burnout; Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; Job Satisfaction; Morale; Organizational Climate; Professional Development; *School Districts; *School Restructuring; Secondary School Teachers; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Burnout; Teacher Participation; *Teacher Persistence

ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that examined the effect of school restructuring on teacher "plateauing" and teacher resiliency. "Plateauing" occurs when an individual perceives his or her situation as stagnant and devoid of challenge. Data were gathered through: (1) observations of a school district undergoing restructuring under the leadership of a new superintendent; (2) document analysis; (3) a questionnaire administered to all (184) professional district staff; and (4) interviews with 25 survey respondents--15 who reported low levels of plateauing (LPs) and 10 who reported very high levels of plateauing (HPs). Findings indicate that the most resilient educators were also the least plateaued and the most likely to become involved in restructuring efforts. However, they tended to be more interested in their own classroom-related activities and their own professional development than in schoolwide activities. The most challenging group for school leaders were those who perceived themselves to be "high plateauers" (HPs). They exhibited lower levels of resiliency, expressed negative attitudes toward restructuring, reported that they felt stuck, and were unwilling or unable to take risks. Suggestions to deal with HPs include: educate HPs about plateauing; provide counseling to improve HPs' professional self-esteem; focus HPs' energies on changeable situations; and shift HPs laterally into new roles or environments. (LMI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 363 947

AN EXPLORATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF SCHOOL DISTRICT RESTRUCTURING TO EDUCATOR PLATEAUING AND RESILIENCY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. Milstein
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Mike M. Milstein
University of New Mexico

This speculative paper is based upon my involvement with restructuring in a Southwest school district where I have also been engaged in field-based research on educator plateauing. In the process I have begun to identify some possible connections between the two--i.e., restructuring efforts and how the district's teachers cope with plateauing. The primary purpose of restructuring is to improve the education of public school students. However, even though it is not intended as such, it is posited that restructuring can have a positive impact on the motivation, challenge, and growth of educators. In turn, it is probable that educators who are more energized and enthusiastic can have a positive impact upon restructuring outcomes.

The intent of the paper is to encourage discussion, debate and thoughtful policy development in ways that can capitalize on an understanding of the relationship between restructuring and educator plateauing and resiliency. After key concepts are defined and discussed the potential connections among them will be explored, employing data collected in the school district.

Definitions

Before exploring the potential relationships of restructuring to plateauing and resiliency, it is important to provide some basic definitions. Plateauing occurs when one's

EA 025 424

situation is perceived to be stagnant and devoid of challenge. According to Bardwick (1986) plateauing can emanate from one's perceptions about his or her life situation (i.e., a perception of routine and sameness about most all aspects of life), work role, or the content of work (i.e., perceived to be replete with repetitive and non-challenging tasks) or beliefs about structure (i.e. perceived lack of promotional opportunities in the organization).

Resiliency has to do with effective "coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging life events." Resilient individuals "may temporarily experience change, sense some personal doubt and experience some disorganization...[but will] use reintegrative and coping skills that allow the individual to learn, develop new skills, and effectively deal with the life events" (Richardson, et. al., 1990, p. 34).

School district restructuring of schools and school districts can be defined as

> systemic change or transformation with the intent of improving educational effectiveness in ways that meet the changing needs of our society. Systemic change is comprehensive: All aspects of the system, including mission, goals, structures, policies, roles, participation, and relationships are candidates for change because they impact what is taught (curricular content), how it is presented (instructional delivery), and where it occurs (the setting) (Milstein, 1993a, p. 3). (Italics and parentheses in the original).

What's The Concern?

School districts are staffed by a senior work force. A 1984 survey found that median classroom experience was 12.7 years (Harris, 1984). Today in many school districts the median classroom experience is closer to 15 years. There is a direct correlation between educator longevity and plateauing: Plateauing

is likely to occur after one remains in a work role for more than three to five years. Given the average tenure of our educational work force, it is probable that many current educators may be experiencing manifestations of plateauing--e.g., perceptions that work has become routinized, work assignments lead to boredom rather than enthusiasm, reluctance to change, desire to avoid stress rather than take risks, and being trapped in these conditions for the foreseeable future.

However, these perceptions are far from universal. Many educators have managed to cope effectively with plateauing by one means or another--changing work roles (e.g., teaching fourth grade rather than second grade or teaching geography rather than American history), pursuing professional development opportunities (e.g., in-district workshops, conferences, course and/or degree work at a university), and seeking promotions (e.g., as diagnosticians, counselors, staff personnel, and administration).

What is the extent to which restructuring and educator plateauing/resiliency interplay? Do aspects of restructuring, such as decentralization, site-based management, participative decision making, team management, and skill development, have the potential to shift the balance away from plateauing and toward resiliency? Does educator resiliency, in turn, impact the effectiveness of restructuring?

Setting And Background

The school district, which extends over a 500 square mile area, includes rural schools and others that are in a village that

lies within a half hour of a major urban center. The district's eight schools serve 3,300 children. The district includes 174 professional staff varying in years of service: 57 with 1-5 years, 20 with 6-8 years, 57 with 9-15 years, and 40 with 15 years or more.

The current superintendent came from a nearby district where he was principal of a new high school which was purposefully created as a site-based management school. His prior experiences in education, particularly at that school, as well as his own educational values, convinced him that it was critical for the district to undertake whatever efforts might be required to restructure its schools in ways that could improve educational effectiveness. Pursuing this belief, he

--worked with the school board to identify priorities, create a meaningful mission and a limited number of goals to support the mission;

--reorganized the central office (including combining key positions and identified budgetary savings that could be used for staff development and other restructuring needs);

--brought all administrators together as an administrative council, thus encouraging wide-spread involvement and ownership, clearer communications, and district-wide focus on restructuring;

--created governing councils at each school site and non-school units such as transportation and maintenance to oversee site-based efforts;

--developed a district-wide structure for instruction and

curricular improvement that is teacher-driven and which emphasizes coordination and continuity while promoting experimentation;

--and created a "School-Community Restructuring Team" that includes representation from all schools, non-school units, as well as representatives of the community. This group focuses on overall direction of the district's restructuring efforts and, as needed, provides facilitation for other in-district groups.

Methods

Data gathering about restructuring occurred naturalistically as I consulted with the school district from the time that the new superintendent arrived. Notes of my observations as well as formal documents, such as minutes of meetings and communications disseminated to staff and community about restructuring, have been reviewed for possible relationships with plateauing and resiliency of professionals in the district.

Data regarding plateauing were gathered through an instrument I developed (Milstein, 1993b, copyright) that establishes the extent to which educators perceive themselves to be plateaued (Kuder-Richardon reliability coefficient alpha of .82). It was administered to all full-time and some part-time professional staff (N=184) in the district.

Data regarding resiliency were collected through interviews with survey outliers--i.e., those who scored at the high and low ends of the plateau survey (fifteen who are experiencing very little plateauing and 10 who are experiencing very high plateauing, for an N of 25). The interview guide is composed of questions

constructed to test for resiliency-related factors such as entrepreneurship, optimism vs. pessimism, self-esteem, perceptions about organizational and community environments', life purposes/goals, self esteem, and coping with transitions. Both high plateauers (HPs) and low plateauers (LPs) were asked the same questions to establish the extent to which answers might be similar or different across the two groups. The complete results of the interviews are much broader in scope than those that are reported here. What follows are responses that relate plateauing and resiliency directly to efforts to restructure the district's schools.

Findings

The district-wide mean score on the plateauing survey was 2.50 on a five point scale. Over-all, this indicates a work force that is about the same in the extent to which it exhibits manifestations of plateauing when compared to a survey of a wider sample of educators conducted throughout the region (mean=2.45). The range among individuals responding to the instrument is wide, with 50 obtaining scores between 1 and 2 (i.e., LPs) and 26 obtaining scores between 3.5 and 5 (i.e., HPs). LPs and HPs who were interviewed scored on the extreme ends of these low and high ranges.

While the interviews were intended to explore how low and high plateauers respond to issues related to resiliency, many responses came up that should be of interest to those charged with managing restructuring efforts. For the remainder of this section results

that relate to how LPs and HPs view restructuring efforts will be summarized. In addition thoughts about educator resiliency and how it might impact HP and LP views about restructuring will be offered as possible sources of the differences that occurred.

Perceptions about Restructuring-Related Issues

Restructuring. LPs referred to the district's restructuring efforts much more frequently than HPs. Further, when they did comment about restructuring it was typically in a positive vein (e.g., "It's full speed ahead with restructuring--they've put their money where their mouth is"..."it's a total effort to improve the educational process") unlike HPs' comments which were frequently more negative (e.g., [restructuring is] "promoting a workaholic life"..."It doesn't honor people who are just focusing on the classroom"..."The recognition is a weakness, creating burnout, stress and anger"..."others are resentful of my efforts 'to go slow' on our progress").

Site-based management. Many LP respondents referred to site-based management, whereas none of the HP respondents made specific note of it. Further, LP responses were quite positive: "With site-based management we are talking to each other more"..."it's a total effort to improve the educational process"..."people help each other." However, even LPs still have some skepticism: "We're a site-based management district. They encourage us a great deal, but words don't always turn into actions."

District and site leadership. Most all LPs had favorable things to say about their leaders: "They're always trying to see

what teachers can do to continue their growth"..."They encourage us to expand our programs"..."They are trying--seeking additional monies to do more"..."I'm free to call the superintendent any time I want"..."hard work in innovative planning gets recognized." On the contrary most HP remarks were more negative regarding leaders in the district: "Not enough intrinsic feedback"..."Leaders don't challenge you to grow--I think they suppress it because when I gave my input the principal threw it out." However, even HPs seem to hold out some hope--"The past administration didn't challenge us. The new administration seems to be different--we'll see if it holds up."

Resiliency and HP and LP Views of Restructuring

As the above quotes indicate, even though HP and LP respondents work in the same school district and in the same schools, their attitudes about restructuring-related activities are very different. Factors associated with resiliency appear to be directly related to these differences. LPs exhibited many more characteristics of resiliency than did HPs. Individuals who exhibit high resiliency--according to Richardson's definition, those who "learn, develop new skills, and effectively deal with life events" (1990, p. 34)--are likely to be:

A. Entrepreneurs--Being able to make things happen for themselves. This requires interest and ability in networking, resource finding, problem solving, persuading, and risk taking.

B. Optimistic--viewing life from an optimistic perspective,

believing that "defeat is just a temporary setback" (Seligman, 1990, p.4).

C. Goal driven--having a sense of purpose and goals to guide one's life. This supports a positive internal sense of self as well as the ability to adapt to changing needs and motivators.

D. High in self esteem--acting independently, assuming responsibility, tolerating frustrations, approaching new challenges with enthusiasm and having the belief that one can influence others" (Bean, 1992).

E. Good at transitions--being able to cope with the unexpected, that which is unsettling and which takes some adjusting to (Schlossberg, 1989).

Interview responses about opportunities for teachers to innovate, be creative, take the initiative, and grow through professional development, provide some insights into the impact of these resiliency characteristics on teachers' attitudes about restructuring.

Innovation and creativity. LP respondents saw restructuring as providing many opportunities to be creative and innovative and they were positive about these opportunities: "Teachers doing innovative things get recognized"..."hard work and innovative things get noticed"..."I can be as creative as I have time and energy to be"..."I've been allowed to move the school in creativeness--being bold works at the school level"..."site-based management has really allowed me to be involved"..."as long as it

is effective and the kids are learning, we have lots of freedom." HPs, on the other hand, are less enthused about these opportunities: "It appears to be more flexible and innovative than in the past, as long as they comply with the administration"..."When they ask who will volunteer--the hell with that"..."I don't get involved because 'they' [the administration] don't want me to grow"..."it's a mandate to be on restructuring committees"..."I keep my mouth shut--I get harassed otherwise."

Challenge and initiative. LPs view themselves as self-starters and see restructuring as providing the opportunities they want to grow. Further, they believe they can be proactive in making their teaching lives better: "We are risk takers and take our own initiative"..."the opportunities are there if you have the desire to work with the kids"..."there's no problem getting where I want to, but you do have to seek the opportunities out." HPs, in contrast, have a sense of not being able to make a difference or at least see little sense in taking the initiative: "Mostly I just want to be left alone"..."be prudent"..."I go from my room to my truck and from my truck to my room"..."My role is defined for me--my input is not valued."

Professional development. LPs identified many more professional development activities that they are engaged in than did HPs. Further, the type of professional development activities differed, with LPs more frequently engaged in degree or other further education activities than HPs. LPs also indicated more appreciation of district efforts to provide in-district

professional development opportunities and to encourage and facilitate these opportunities outside of the district. LPs noted that they are "encouraged to attend workshops" and that the district "has lots of budget for this." HPs tended to be less enthused: One noted that "you have to be connected to the information distributors to get to conferences and when I do go I get flack from others," while another said that to grow as a professional she "needs to get back more of her enthusiasm, to be happy."

Implications

Returning to the initial question--is there a linkage between plateauing/resiliency and restructuring? Data collected in this southwestern school district indicate that there are indeed some important connections and that these may have important implications for other school districts.

Low plateauers and restructuring. The most obvious conclusion is that those educators who are most resilient are also least plateaued and most likely to become actively involved in restructuring efforts. These educators seem to see restructuring as a way of expressing their creativity and as a way to promote their continuing professional growth and development. In short, there is a latent energy source among LPs that is available and waiting to be tapped.

However, even educators who are LPs and highly resilient cannot automatically be counted on to enter into restructuring activities with great enthusiasm. LPs in the study had positive

perceptions about being able to affect the organization, but they tended to be less enthusiastic about becoming engaged in organization-wide efforts than they were about undertaking efforts to improve their classroom effectiveness. This finding parallels that of an earlier study in which a group of educators were asked what they do to promote their continued growth. Many more were interested in activities related to their classrooms and their own professional development than they were in school-wide activities such as serving on committees (Milstein, 1990).

Finally, many LPs in the study reported that, for whatever reason, they do not feel comfortable acknowledging their own accomplishments. At the same time, they also noted that it is necessary for them to feel a sense of achievement and importance. The message seems clear. If district and school leaders expect LPs to make significant contributions to school-wide restructuring efforts, they will have to develop intrinsic and extrinsic reward systems to promote positive recognition and reward.

<u>High plateauers and restructuring</u>. By far the more challenging group for school leaders are those who perceive themselves to be HPs. Many HPs feel stuck, unable and/or unwilling to take risks. To the extent that they have remained resilient, it is usually a defensive/survival posture which minimizes the potential for school leaders to even reach them, leave alone impact them positively. Once these educators work out their view of themselves and the organizational world they work in, is it possible to help them get off their plateau and be challenged to

participate effectively in restructuring efforts?

We all know of cases in which individuals somehow turn their HP situations around. In fact, one of the HPs in the current study made just such a decision--taking a stress and plateauing course at the local university, re-examining her status quo and her life's goals, and actively becoming involved in her school's restructuring activities. As a result, today she is much more enthusiastic about teaching and is making a more positive contribution to the education of her students. Cases such as these argue against fatalistically assuming that HPs are impossible to change.

Still, what can be done about the great bulk of HP educators who do not know how to, or do not choose to, become more engaged and energized through restructuring efforts? What can be done by district leaders to move many of these individuals out of the HP group and closer, if not into, the LP group? A few initial steps are suggested below.

First, it might be useful to provide HPs with more information about plateauing, its costs, and effective ways of responding to it. A few HPs in the study even rejected the notion that they are plateaued. Many did not have a good sense of what to do about it even if they recognized it. Instead they focused on activities that are not likely to alleviate their problems (e.g., taking days off, minimizing their work-related activities, and avoiding interactions with other educators--especially administrators).

Second, there must be recognition that some initial remediation work might have to be done before looking for direct

ways of involving HPs in restructuring. HPs tend to be low in resiliency factors. As such, it might be useful to first promote involvement by HPs in counseling activities aimed at improving their self-esteem and otherwise positively modifying their perceptions of themselves as professionals. Gaining a more positive sense of self can become a springboard to more interest and ability to become engaged in restructuring activities.

Third, it might be helpful to move HPs' focus away from things they cannot change to things they can change. HPs' tendencies to dwell on the negative and to project, focusing on things outside themselves as the "problem," keep them locked in a negative place. School leaders can be quite helpful to HPs and, in turn, can promote restructuring efforts by helping them refocus their energies and concerns on that which is within their power to change and help them acquire the strategies and supports necessary to do so.

Finally, many HPs may only be situationally-plateaued. That is, they may have been in a particular teaching situation or worked in a particular school for too many years. Challenging HPs to make lateral-shifts into less known roles or new environments can free up those educators who are situationally-plateaued and, at the same time, turn their energies toward making more positive contributions to restructuring.

In Conclusion

Policy makers need to assess the readiness of their work force before launching major restructuring efforts. It is important to

assess the starting place for all of the educators involved. Knowing the extent to which they exhibit manifestations of plateuaing as well as their current state of resilience can be helpful in making this assessment. Are there structures and processes in place to help HPs move off their plateau and become more engaged? Are there structures and processes in place to help LPs transcend the typical teachers' perspective of their work place being the classroom rather than the over-all school and become more motivated to engage in school-wide restructuring?

These questions are important. Responses to them can make the difference between effective and ineffective restructuring efforts. To unleash the people-power needed to make restructuring work purposeful efforts on the part of school leaders must be made to seek their positive engagement in the effort. Just as important, these efforts and the subsequent involvement of educators in restructuring can also be a powerful device to help renew and re-energize our educational work force.

References

Bardwick, J. (1986). The plateauing trap. New York: American Management Association.

Bean, R. (1992). The four conditions of self-esteem. 2nd ed., Cruz, California: ETR Associates.

Milstein, M. (1990). Plateauing: A Growing Problem for Educators and Educational Organizations. Teaching and Teacher Education, Vol. 6, No. 2, 173-181.

Milstein, M. (1993a). Restructuring schools: doing it right. Newbury Park, California: Corwin Press.

Milstein, M. (1993b). Plateauing, copyrighted.

Richardson, G. E., Neiger, B. L., Jensen, S., and Kumpfer, K. L. (Nov-Dec.,1990). The Resiliency Model. Health Education, 33-39.

Schlossberg, N. K. (1989). Overwhelmed, coping with life's ups and downs. Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Co.

Seligman, M. E. P. (1990). Learned optimism. New York: Pocket Books.